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Paul Burt. Symbolism in Stone and
Glass in Wesley Methodist Church,
U. of I., Urbana, IL (1962?)

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY



SYMBOLISM
in
STONE
and
GLASS
IN
Wesley
Methodist
Church

CHURCH OF THE
WESLEY FOUNDATION
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA, ILLINOIS



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Symbolism in Stone and Glass

IN

WESLEY METHODIST CHURCH

Church of the Wesley Foundation

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

URBANA, ILLINOIS

1967

The very piling up of stone upon stone, forming the structure of the church, is itself a symbol of a people's felt need and desire to worship God together, to have some place wherein all the transient vicissitudes of their common life may be brought into the presence of the Eternal, celebrating again all the benefactions of his creation and providence, and finding his strength for all of life's demands.

Though contemporary in its accent of simplicity, Wesley Church has the architectural proportions of the Gothic tradition and so preserves the hallowed feeling and symbolism associated with it. A part of this tradition, shared with other architectural periods, is the construction of the church in the form of a cross. The stem of the cross forms the main body of the church and is called the "nave", from the Latin word for ship, thus symbolizing the ark of salvation. The cross arms are known as the "transept", and the head of the cross forms the "chancel", which includes "choir" and "sanctuary", and is so named after the "cancellum" or "gate," once separating the clergy from the laity. The entrance, which is the base of the cross, is known as the "narthex".

All of these elements are found in Wesley Church, though in modified form. The transept is not so apparent as in the traditional cruciform church, since by a series of steps the nave widens until it almost meets the transept line marked by the two east and west windows. The chancel, on the other hand, is proportionately deep, providing for an organ and choir of one hundred, and a free-standing Communion Table with a Communion rail and kneeler all the way around it.

One

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

Since a part of each service is conducted from the Communion Table, with the minister facing the congregation, the minister and people are symbolically gathered about the Lord's Table, whether at Holy Communion or at any other time.

Wesley Church was designed by Mr. Harold E. Wagoner, of Philadelphia, who served as consulting architect throughout its construction. Mr. Wagoner is one of the most distinguished church architects of our time and has built churches in all parts of the United States. He has served as one of the founders and presidents of the Church Architects' Guild. His creative skill is especially shown in his design of Wesley Church by the way in which he has related the new sanctuary and educational unit to the earlier social center building of the Wesley Foundation, designed by Holabird and Roche in 1921. This social center building has been called one of the finest reproductions of Jacobean architecture in America, a style deliberately chosen as reminiscent of John Wesley's Oxford. Constructed of the same regional Indiana limestone and slate roofing, the two buildings are made to blend and complement each other. Whereas the older building finds its significance in richness of detail not now reproducible, the new sanctuary finds its significance in a chaste simplicity, which makes it belong to the modern scene, but also, and especially, in the upward thrust of the 104 foot stone tower, surmounted by a 85 foot spire and cross.

The walnut pews and chancel furnishings were all specially designed for Wesley Church, and make their own contribution to the symbolism of the sanctuary. The tester, high above the pulpit, bears the carved inscription which serves both as the church's central affirmation of faith and pledge of loyalty: "Jesus Christ is Lord." Two bands of carved lettering on the James C. Baker pulpit spell out the words from the office of ordination: "Take thou authority to preach the Word of God." The lectern, the gift of Mrs. Jennie Spaeth Wallace and the Spaeth family, in memory of Stanley Spaeth, is signed with a Chi Rho in polished brass. The carved legend around the Communion Table, the gift of the Reverend and Mrs. Ralph G. Dunlop, reminds those who gather about it of the Eternal Presence in the words: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

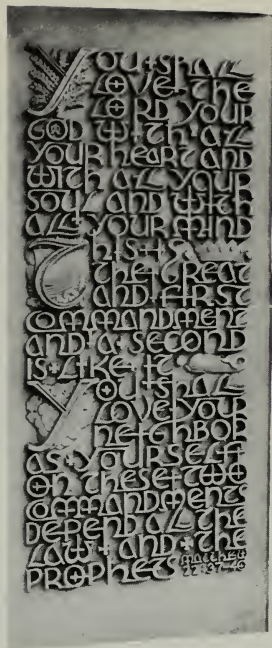
The stone carvings at various points of the building were designed in Mr. Wagoner's office. In some cases, casts were first made in Philadelphia and the sculpturing done by the Indiana Limestone Company. In other cases, the sculpturing was done directly from the drawings.



Above the north entrance to the church stand the words "Worship in Spirit and Truth". These words from John 4:24 are both an invitation and an admonition to all who approach the sanctuary: An invitation to seek the Lord, who is our only hope and peace; and yet an admonition to seek him not for material gain nor to sustain comfortable prejudice, but for his own sake and in utter loyalty to truth from whatever source it dawns upon us. These words also reflect the seal of the Wesley Foundation which bears the Greek words: En Pneumati Kai Aletheiai.

On either side of the north main entrance are carved the names of the two organizations which cooperated in erecting this sanctuary to the glory of God and now use it in his service: "Wesley Methodist Church" and "The Wesley Foundation".

At the northeast corner will be seen the cornerstone inscribed with the date and the cross cut into the corner itself. The form of the cross chosen is that commonly known as the Maltese cross. This ties in with the seal of the Wesley Foundation, which bears a Maltese cross, at one time the emblem of the Epworth League of the Methodist Episcopal Church and now of the Methodist Youth Fellowship of the Methodist Church.



Just to the west of the north doorway, between the sanctuary and the educational building, in a splayed panel, the full height of the door, bearing Christ's great commandments as given in Matthew 22:37-40. This carving is rich with incidental symbolism—the wheat, the vine, the ship, the fish, the Alpha and Omega, the crown, and innumerable crosses.

Just west of the large panel are three smaller panels portraying the three purposes to which the Church School, or for that matter the entire church, is dedicated: Worship, Study and Service.

2. The panel representing Study depicts the Bible and the lighted lamp of knowledge.



1. The panel representing Worship portrays praying hands, together with the cross and crown.

3. The panel representing Service portrays the cruet and jars of ointment, traditionally associated with the merciful ministry of the Good Samaritan.





High up on the four corners of the church stand panels with the traditional representations of the four Evangelists. These are in order, counter-clockwise, beginning with the northwest corner:

1. Matthew, a young winged man.
2. Mark, a winged lion.
3. Luke, a winged bull.
4. John, an eagle.

The remaining panels of carved stone are all in sets of three.



OVER THE EAST TRANSEPT WINDOWS

The center panel is basically a Chi Rho, which was one of the earliest monograms used for Christ, taken from the first two letters of the word Christ when spelled in ancient Greek capitals XPICTOC. But other symbols are introduced such as: The anchor for hope; the crown for victory; the lamp for the Word of God (Psalm 119:105); the waves which stand either for the sea of life or the water of baptism; the fish, a very ancient Christian symbol, since the Greek word for fish furnished the initial letters for the phrase which translated reads: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior". IHS is another monogram representing the first three letters of the Greek form of Jesus.

The panel at the left depicts the Tree of Knowledge and symbolizes for us the University and the scholarly disciplines to which we are called.

The panel on the right portrays two hands clasped across the world, symbolizing the World Community, a token of which we do actually find on this campus and which we are dedicated to make more real throughout the world. On the lower right, we see the trefoil, symbol both of the Trinity and of cooperation, the theological and practical foundations of World Community.

Thus it is the purpose of this church to keep the truth revealed in Christ at the center of all pursuit of knowledge and human understanding.





OVER THE WEST TRANSEPT WINDOWS

The center panel shows an Alpha and Omega, a frequent monogram symbol for the Eternal God, taken from Revelation 1:8, but enriched with other symbolism: A crown as emblem of our Lord's kingly office, a cross made up of four Tau crosses and known as a "Cross potent" symbolizing the Savior's power to heal the bodies and souls of men.

The panel to the left portrays John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and for whom this church and Foundation are named. In the upper right hand corner is the coat of arms of the Wesley family.

The panel to the right depicts a Methodist circuit rider on horseback and the name "Wesley Foundation", two of the Methodist developments out of the Illinois prairie.

Thus in this church the Methodist heritage coming from overseas and from Illinois combine to serve the kingdom of God.

OVER THE EAST CHANCEL WINDOWS

Three of the great doctrines of the Christian faith:

1. The Incarnation, represented by the griffin, a mythical animal with the wings and beak of an eagle and the body of a lion, symbolizing the divine and human natures of Christ.



2. The Atonement, represented by the pelican, which reputedly tears at her breast to feed her young with her own flesh and blood, thereby saving them by her own death.



3. The Resurrection, represented by the peacock, which is transformed from an indifferent bird into a glorious creature by its resplendent spread of plumage.



OVER THE WEST CHANCEL WINDOWS



Three Sacraments of the Church:

1. The Sacrament of the Word, symbolized by the open Bible. Inscribed on the open book are the letters VDMA, the initials of the phrase "Verbum Dei Manet (in) Aeternum" (The Word of God remains forever). The addition of an Alpha and Omega forms a vertical Alpha-Mu-Omega meaning "the beginning — the present — the end".

2. The Sacrament of Baptism, represented by a scallop shell, which was believed to have been used to pour water on Christ's head at his baptism. The water is represented by the drops under the shell and the waves that form the background.



3. The Sacrament of Holy Communion, represented by a sheaf of wheat and a bunch of grapes.



AT THE EAST CHANCEL ENTRANCE

The Trinity, by which this congregation was previously known (Trinity Church, 1906-1956):

1. A triangle with the all-seeing eye symbolizing God, the Eternal Father (Psalm 33:18).



2. The Lamb of God on the Book of the Seven Seals referred to in Revelation 5 and symbolizing Jesus Christ, the Son. The INRI are the initials of the Latin legend said to have been on Christ's cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."



3. The descending dove, probably the most universal symbol of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16).



AT THE WEST CHANCEL ENTRANCE

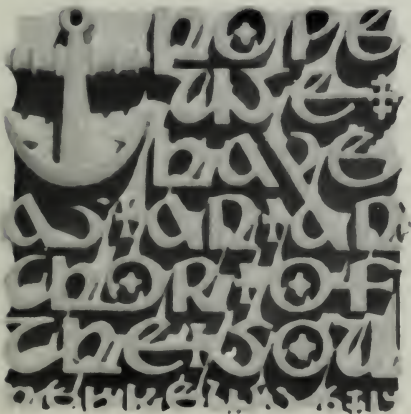


Faith, Hope and Love (I
Corinthians 13:13):

1. Faith symbolized by a
Maltese cross and this quo-
tation from Habakkuk 2:4:
"The righteous shall live by
his faith."

2. Hope represented by an
anchor, a very ancient symbol of
hope as revealed in Hebrews 6:
19: "Hope we have as an anchor
of the soul."

3. Love symbolized by the
heart and this quotation from I
John 4:16: "He who dwelleth in
love dwelleth in God."



THE CHRIST WINDOW

The architect so planned the interior of the church that the eye of the worshipper is carried along in climactic manner to the tall, single lancet chancel window. Its very proportions are striking: three feet four inches wide, and forty-two feet high, reaching from the chancel floor to the ceiling.

For this unique setting, the Willet Stained Glass Studios, of Philadelphia and Ardmore, Pennsylvania, designed and executed this Christ Window, which is a growing inspiration to all who worship in Wesley Church.

Mr. Henry Lee Willet, President of the Willet Stained Glass Studios, originator of the special treatment exemplified by his "gold" window, first tried out in the Westwood Community Methodist Church, Los Angeles, California, in 1950, has this to say about the process:

"First and foremost, the artist has incorporated those essential lessons taught him by the twelfth and thirteenth century craftsmen who worked in the Cathedral of Chartres, namely, that a window is always part of the architecture, that it must be first a ministry of color, always two-dimensional in character, with the delineation of the figures, symbolism and ornament carried out as much as possible by the use of strong lead lines.

"This last precept has been followed one hundred percent in these 'gold' windows. None of the detailing or drawing is done with pigment painted on the glass. The figures and symbolism are obtained by the use of masses of sculptured sheet lead, so incised and arranged as to let the full glory of the colored glass shine through the narrow lead apertures, giving an effect of intense brilliance coupled with great strength and virility. The figures and details are neither archaic, grotesque nor traditional, but are designed in a contemporary manner suited to their architectural surroundings.

"The masses of sculptured lead were 'flown' with gold leaf of various depths and shades, layer upon layer, until they gleam beneath the spot-light's ray. This makes possible three quite different, but equally vital, effects for the focal center of the church, giving round-the-clock visibility. At times when there is no artificial light in the interior, when sunlight streams through the colored glass of the lancets, an effect is

obtained much like that in the jeweled windows in the church of Sainte Chapelle in Paris. At night when spotlights play on the interior surface of the window, there is revealed the startlingly beautiful effect of a lacy gold reredos. Still a third effect is possible in the daytime, when the daylight from outside is enhanced by artificial light from within the church (as during the morning worship service), and a jeweled vibrancy will be noticed plus a certain amount of reflection from the gold of the sculptured lead, all of which produces an effect quite unique and original in stained glass."

It is the subject matter of the window that gives significance to its name. Twelve approximately square panels make up the window. The first ten panels, from bottom to top, depict events in the life of Christ: The nativity, Jesus learning in the temple, Jesus in the carpenter shop, the baptism at the hands of John, the sermon on the mount, Jesus healing the daughter of Jairus, the feeding of the 5,000, the last supper, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The two top panels show a figure of Jesus Christ as the hope of the world. The ornamental background is composed of grape vines and leaves, for Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches", making the window reminiscent of the great Jesse Tree window in the Cathedral of Chartres, which has inspired countless individuals down through the centuries. The subjects of the panels, discussed further in the next section, were all chosen because of their special relevance to a church serving a university community.

The glass in the panel is of many colors. Blue and red predominate. The pieces, of different thicknesses, are held together by the leaded forms. Some of the glass was imported from France. Some was made by the Blenko Glass Works of West Virginia. The lead sculpturing of some of the tracery and less important figures and shapes is coated with palladium, a malleable silver-white metal of the platinum group.

The window is the gift of Dr. and Mrs. A. L. Whiting, for many years residents of Urbana and members of Wesley Methodist Church.

The inscription will include these words from II Corinthians 4:6: "It is the God who said 'let light shine out of darkness', who has shined in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Christ." This was also the text of the first sermon in the new sanctuary of Wesley Church, December 13, 1959, when the Christ Window was dedicated.

PANELS OF THE
CHRIST WINDOW



1. "The Nativity", symbolizing our faith in the incarnation, God's revelation of himself in terms of human life and his identification of himself with man and history.



2. "The visit of the boy Jesus to the Temple", symbolizing the process of education by which, as he grew in stature, he grew also "in wisdom and in favor with God and man", which process is also a chief concern of this church. (The small figures are those of Joseph and Mary looking for their son.)



3. "The boy Jesus with his father in the carpenter shop", where he learned to work, as we must all learn to work to meet the necessities of life, not only for ourselves, but for the world. (The small figure on the right is that of Mary "pondering all these things in her heart".)



4. "The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan", symbolizing his acceptance of his vocation, and the vocation we hope this church will help everyone who worships here to know, the sense of being called of God to make the most of his or her life for the sake of God's kingdom in the world. (The small figure represents the temptations of Jesus.)



5. "The Sermon on the Mount", symbolizing Christ's teaching as the true way of life, and reminding all teachers who worship here that they must first learn of him. (The small figures depict the parables: on the left that of the Sower, on the right that of the Prodigal Son.)

6. "The healing of Jairus' daughter," symbolizing not only Christ's healing ministry, but his and the church's concern with health of body, mind and spirit. (The small figures are those of the parents watching.)



7. "The boy with the loaves and fishes", symbolizing the fact that, if we share whatever we have, miracles are bound to happen. (The small figures in the background represent the multitude.)





8. "The Last Supper", reminding us that when we gather here we are gathered about the Lord's table to be fed by him with the bread of life. (The small figure on the right represents Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, and that on the left, Judas leaving the Upper Room.)



9. "The Crucifixion" revealing the inexpressible length and depth of God's love. (Small figure on the left is that of Jesus in Gethsemane.)



10. "The Resurrection" as told in the story of the Emmaus road, symbolizing for us in Christ's church his eternal presence and companionship, if we walk down the dusty roads of God's purpose and man's need. (In the right border we see an empty tomb with a Chi Rho emanating from it.)



11 and 12. "Christ, the Hope of the World" with his hands outstretched in blessing over the two hemispheres. At the top is shown the descending dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

PHOTOGRAPHS

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